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THE HOMILETIC USE OF THE BIBLE.¹

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THE interpretation of life to men, and of men to their own selves, seems to me the great and beautiful thing. To have set before men a standard in the commonest things of life, to which they are perfectly conscious that they belong, and yet to have touched their contrition that they do not belong to it more thoroughly than they do—that, it seems to me, is to have preached. To have spoken the simple truth, which no man can deny, about any aspect of life, even the most commonplace, and to have breathed into men courage and resoluteness concerning it, to have touched their aspiration to the following out of that simple truth—that, it seems to me, is to have preached.

Consider the appeal which Jesus in his manhood made to men, and which even the record concerning him now makes. As the heart listens freely to the story of that life, as there rises before us the image of the fellowship with God maintained amid incessant toil and common intercourse with men, of sacrifice undimmed by one thought of self-indulgence, of love which grew more fervent amid ingratitude—in other words, as there passes before us the spectacle of that perfect human life—the instinct is stirred within us to recognize there the image of our own true selves; but yet the image of the self we never have been, but are sorry that we have not; of the self which, but for this vision, we might never have dreamed of being; the self to which, without his power over us, we can never hope to rise, but to become which we henceforth dedicate ourselves. And to have set forth such a portion of the common life or any part of it, to have touched the springs of character, to have prompted

¹ An address recently delivered at the Philadelphia Convention of the Religious Education Association, and to be obtained, together with the other addresses of that Convention, in book form from the Executive Office of the Association, Chicago, Ill.

faithfulness, and to have fostered love in the spirit of Jesus Christ—that, it seems to me, is to have preached Christ. To have interpreted the sorrows of life in the light of the sacrifice of Christ, to have gathered out of his loving sacrifice the sense of our forgiveness, and to have lifted men to consecration of themselves to like sacrifice—that it seems to me, is to have preached Christ and him crucified, “to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to them which believe, the power of God and the wisdom of God unto salvation.”

Preparation for such preaching is acquired in real experience of life in the midst of men—experience of every sort, the kind of experience which teaches sympathy with men. The great qualification is the genuine, the unbounded interest in life—the interest in men in the living of their lives, the taking pleasure in putting all that we have and all that we are at the disposal of men to help them genuinely to live.

And, still further, the preparation for such preaching is gathered out of the book which all the ages have agreed to call the Book of Life—the real book of the real experience of mankind in its highest struggles after truth, in the utterance of its most glorious aspiration, and in the answer of God to the cry of his children; and, above all, the answer of God through the word, the life, of the one perfect man, the Son of God, the Savior of the world.

No one can preach from the Bible who has no sense of the reality of its inspiration, no humble and reverent acknowledgment of its reality as revelation; and yet we may frankly say that we construe its inspiration and its revelation somewhat differently from that manner in which we ourselves may in former years have understood these things, and surely we construe them differently from the manner in which oftentimes the generations of the past have done. They did not reckon with facts of human history touching its origin, the record of which facts is yet in all these writings clearly to be seen. They did not reckon with human qualities of this Book of books which are yet wholly obvious. They did not reckon with the individual characteristics of the men who wrote, and with the con-

ditions, the circumstances, and the need of those for whom they wrote.

But the divine activity and the human activity do not exclude each other. If man himself is inexplicable save as sharing in the wider life of a universal reason, if the processes of history be realized as but the working out of the inherent and divine purposes, the expression of an indwelling divine force, then revelation denotes no longer an interference from without in that development, but it becomes the normal method of expressing the relation of the immanent spirit of God to the children of men at the crises of their fate. Then revelation and inspiration are experiences of men in precisely the line and by the method of all their greater and nobler experiences. Then revelation is merely the religious experience in more than ordinary significance and power, coupled, if it is to be useful to others, with the ability on the part of him who receives it to express it for the good of others. It is reasonable and moral; it lies in the line of everything else that is reasonable and moral in man's life.

Inspiration is the normal and continuous effect of the contact of man with the thought of God, of the spirit of God with the spirit of man. The relation is never broken, but there are times at which it is more particularly felt, and to these times the religious sense of mankind, not without the true instinct, tends to restrict the words "revelation" and "inspiration." But it means the restriction and separation of that experience and its content from the ordinary one in degree, and not in kind. It becomes unthinkable that God should not reveal himself, or that man should rise to the highest pitch of his moral aspiration and endeavor, and to the sublimest level of his spiritual life, without receiving revelation from that God who is not far from every one of us, in whom we live and move and have our being, and who is not the God of the dead only, but also of the living. Such an experience was that of prophets, poets, law-givers of the ancient covenant; such an experience, in an immeasurably greater degree, was that of Christ himself. Such a turning-point in the life of the race was the advent of Christianity.

Such a record of a revelation and an inspiration wholly unparalleled is the Book in which the impress of that Christ and the fresh impulse of his spirit is preserved for us.

But it needs no saying that, with such a theory of Scripture, the very strength of the Scripture in its homiletic use lies in its human quality. Not as if that human quality excluded the divine—quite the contrary. It is that human quality, it is that truth of the Bible to the human experience at its greatest and its best, which is the index of the divine. And equally it is that truth of the Bible to the human experience; it is its reflection of our best endeavors, and equally of our failures and our sins; it is its fidelity to our struggles after righteousness, and equally the sternness of its judgment of our follies and our crimes, that makes it evermore the voice of God for the life of man. And, so far from having lost any of its power as a book to be preached from, it seems to me that it has gained immeasurably for the modern preacher; and with the most modern view of Scripture precisely comes all this wealth and power and naturalness of its appeal to all that is great and true in human nature. It is the appeal of God to man through the human nature of the saints of old, and shall we not as well say through the matchless perfection also of the human nature of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin, made perfect through suffering? And in that he himself hath suffered, being tempted, he knoweth how also to succor them which are tempted. It is the very fact that there is no step of all the pathway which God calls on you and me to tread, in which the man of Nazareth has not gone before us. It is this which makes of him the guide, exemplar, helper, friend, in the recesses of our moral being the true Savior.

Men have said sometimes: "What can one do with the Old Testament in preaching? Is not the theological truth of the Old Testament in large part superseded by the revelation of the New?" Well, if one has no thought beyond preaching theology, perhaps this is true; but if what one desires in preaching is to appeal to life, to touch the depths of genuine religious experi-

ence, and to see how God led men, mistaken, falling, sinful like ourselves, yet led them by paths of service to himself, then are there any more wonderful examples than those which are furnished by the saints and sinners of old time? Is there any poetry of religious aspiration which has ever equaled, or, so far as we can see, will ever equal, the cry of the soul of man to God as it is voiced in the Psalms? Is there any record of the struggles of man's soul with the problem of the evil in the world such as that which has faced us in the book of Job? Is there any book more truly modern in its questioning and pessimism, and yet in its reversion to the necessity of duty, than is Ecclesiastes?

And when one comes to speak of the New Testament, what is it in the apostles themselves, what is it in such a man as Peter, or any of the rest, which most appeals to us? Is it not the candor with which the humanity of the man is delineated for us in the story of his life and contact with the Master whom he loved and yet denied? And shall we not say that it is by this very quality that the Christ himself moves us as he does? That he is a being from a greater and a better world than ours is sufficiently obvious; but if he were that alone, would he move us as he does? If the virtues which he illustrates, the qualities of life and soul which he displays, and if the purposes of life which he reveals, were all alien to ourselves and such as belonged but to a being of another sphere, would he move us as he does? Should we not say: "Ah, it was natural for him to be that; he was no man, as we are, and it can never be natural for us men to be as he was." It is the fact that, despite all, he is one of us, and we in inmost soul and purest purposes would be one with him. It is this that breaks us all down in contrition, and then lifts us up to mighty endeavor and the everlasting hope that we shall one day through him be pure and true, that when we see him we shall be like him.

Sometimes it seems to me that preaching is one of the most futile things which a man ever could attempt, for we speak to hundreds as if they were but one, and speak of duty as if it were but one, when in simple truth there are as many duties

as there are persons. And yet at bottom preaching is the simplest thing in the world. It is so simple that you wonder that we all fail to do it so many times a year. A man has nothing to do but in fidelity and fearlessness to say something touching the human life, which is absolutely true and real to himself, and by that truth and that reality touching human life to move the souls of other men, his hearers, to seek and find the truth of God, the message of his word and spirit for their own lives as well.

And as the preparation of a man's own heart for such living and real appeal to the hearts of his fellows, and as the means and material of helpfulness to the moral life and endeavor of his fellows, as the aid of the interpretation of men to themselves and of God to men, as the deposit of the most exalted spiritual experience of humanity and the record of the highest revelation of God for humanity, there is no book for one moment to be mentioned, nor are all books besides for one moment to be mentioned, with this of the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament. Nor is the availability of this book for the preacher the less, but rather, as it seems to me, it is immeasurably the greater, if that preacher has come to hold the newest views, and is most inspired by the most thoroughgoing historical, critical, and literary spirit concerning these Scriptures. The answer of God to man is read in its pages just as of old, because we see the Book as the book of the most exalted humanity, and therefore the truest record to us of the communication of divinity.